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SUBJECT: MOHELI, THE FORGOTTEN COMORAN ISLAND

REF: ANTANANARIVO 0685

¶1. SUMMARY. There are four inhabited islands in the Comoran archipelago. France administers Mayotte. Of the other three, comprising the Union of the Comoros, two are of comparable size and population - Grande Comore being slightly larger than Anjouan. The third is Moheli, an environmental jewel with a population of barely 36,000. Its size lends itself to serving as a "laboratory" for development and may lead to its selection as a Millennium Village. What is more, under the "rotating presidency" provision of the Union constitution, four years hence the next President will hail from Moheli. This cable provides some general impressions of the island.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. In conjunction with the Comoros July 6 National Day, and to congratulate the recently elected island presidents of Grande Comore and Moheli (Reftel), Charge visited Moheli (called Mwali in Comoran) from July 7-9.

¶3. Moheli might be described as "bite-sized." As such it has attracted considerable interest in recent months from some significant players seeking to use it as a "laboratory" for development. According to Opia Kumah, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Resident Coordinator in the Comoros, he has interested Jeffrey Sachs in making Moheli - the entire island - one of Sachs' model Millennium Villages. These are designed to test Sachs' hypothesis that a substantial infusion of development assistance can jump-start societies caught in the poverty trap and start them down the road to prosperity. In addition, the Chinese Government is reportedly willing to fund an effort to eradicate malaria on Moheli. Here the theory is that malaria needs human hosts to propagate. If everyone on the island were to be simultaneously given treatment and prophylaxis, the chain of transmission could be broken and Moheli could become malaria free. The Comoros Government is awaiting World Health Organization (WHO) certification that the medication the Chinese are proposing to use is WHO-approved. Following that, a major education effort will be needed to get buy-in from the residents of the island. However, it remains an intriguing concept that may prove successful - at least until the first cousins/aunts/uncles return to visit carrying the malaria parasite in their blood.

¶4. Politics in Moheli is largely dysfunctional. The Charge's driver joked about a pothole on the main road being ex-island President Fazul's "four million Euro" pothole. He meant Fazul had claimed infrastructure improvements but that the results were lacking while the funds went missing. For example, the road

circling the island has a ten-kilometer gap that is impassable by car, defeating the purpose of a "circle." Newly-elected president Mohamed Ali Said told Charge that he hopes to improve the lives of the people of Moheli but he worried that he would not have the resources necessary to make a difference. This concern appeared justified, when a walking tour of the offices and residence of the president showed that Fazul and his staff had removed everything overnight on moving out after losing the election - furniture, appliances, even down to fixtures and light bulbs.

¶5. Ali Said forwarded a note describing some of the problems he faces on Moheli (and, of course, seeking U.S. assistance in addressing them). Over eighty percent of the population falls below the poverty line. Fifty percent of students do not complete primary school and less than five per cent complete secondary school. In addition, costs are much higher on Moheli as many basic needs must be imported from Grande Comore and Anjouan. The shipment costs raise the price, and supply disruption is common.

¶6. The economy is largely agricultural. Subsistence farmers and fishermen form the bulk of the economically active population. Although money poverty is widespread, hunger is virtually unknown thanks to the bountiful banana plantations, a staple of Mohelian diet. Agricultural exports are diverse but small in quantity: cloves, vanilla, and ylang-ylang (flowers whose extract is used in perfume production) all are grown. Copra had been a substantial export but is declining as a virus decimates production in the island's palm groves.

¶7. For all of these problems, the ecotourism potential of Moheli is enormous. On the north shore, dozens of 200-pound green turtles come ashore every night to lay their eggs. In the past, villagers would eat the turtles and their eggs, and poachers reportedly visited from Anjouan to partake of the hunt. This is becoming increasingly rare as local and international NGOs have raised

ANTANANARI 00000702 002 OF 002

conservation awareness among the villagers and as tourist visitors with cash to pay guides provide a more lucrative alternative value for the turtles. Moheli's hills are one of two places on earth where the critically endangered Livingstone flying fox may be found.

This is the largest species of bat in the world having a wingspan of nearly five feet. Finally, almost the entire south shore of Moheli, extending to include several offshore uninhabited islets, forms the Comoros' only national park - a marine sanctuary. One modest resort on this stretch of coast shares a beach with the local village - and it also has two private beaches of its own. It is a jewel and, when the Charge dropped by, it was empty. Without better infrastructure, clearly, Moheli's environmental treasures will remain largely unexplored by visitors. Unless this development is done very carefully, perhaps it is better that way.

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